

# **CITIZENS ADVISORY COUNCIL REGION 7 – MILES CITY MEETING NOTES January 5, 2011**

**CAC Attendance:** Bill Kessinger, Warren Broeder, Julie Jordan, Greg Mohr, Dan R. Fox, Chris Pileski, Art Hayes, George Luther, Rob Reukauf, Bob Hagedorn

**Absent CAC Members:** Brett Hoaglund

**FWP Staff Attendance:** Dean Waltee, Windy Davis, Mike Backes, John Little, John Ensign, Mike Moore, Brad Schmitz, Dwayne Andrews, Erin O'Connor, Matt Hagedorn

**Public Present:** Chuck Laakso, Mark Jacobsen

Dwayne began the meeting by asking everyone to introduce themselves as there was several FWP staff present who the members had not yet met.

Rob inquired about the "Wardens" show on TV and if we had any enforcement personnel appearing, which we do. Region 7 has had several wardens on previous episodes.

## **2010 Hunting Season Update**

John Ensign, regional Wildlife Manager, gave a summary of the past hunting season. Weather played a significant role in populations and harvest. The area received above average moisture in the spring and summer through the fall, which led to excellent vegetation production. The additional cover allowed animals to disperse more so than usual.

*Upland Game Birds:* Experienced very good production, especially sharp-tailed grouse. Sage grouse production was also good; their harvest in this part of the state is typically miniscule. Pheasant numbers seemed good across the region and harvest followed suit. One thing of note was that Hungarian partridges are showing up well this fall, which is unusual.

Turkey populations the last couple years have been hampered by rough winters and heavy spring snow, which has led to significant mortalities. Turkey production in 2009 declined, but seems to be a little better this year.

In previous years, turkey hunters could harvest two gobblers in the spring with the opportunity to use both spring and fall tags in the fall. With the decline in turkey numbers, we eliminated the use of the spring tag in the fall. It is likely this will stay the same for the coming fall. As far as harvest is concerned, from 2007 to 2009 fall harvest has dropped 36%, hen harvest has dropped 64%. Spring harvest dropped 20%.

*Big Game seasons:* Check stations were ran at Hysham, Ashland, Glendive, Baker, Mosby and Broadus. Over 2,000 hunters were checked this fall. General consensus from hunters is that there was success with the seasons and the opportunities provided. Our typical success rate is pretty good; 70-73% for all hunters.

We do two surveys for antelope-a late winter/early spring ground survey and trend surveys in the summer. A substantial decline in numbers was noticed in our most recent surveys. Numbers are

down 30%-40% below the long term average (LTA) across the region, which resulted in a decrease in the doe/fawn license and the either-sex license quotas. What is most notable this year was a decline in fawn numbers and also a reasonable decline in the yearling population, which can be attributed to winter mortality. Typical harvest usually shows 50-60% of the harvest being bucks; this year was about 70%. Notable this year was that 60-75% of the harvest was 4 years old or older, indicating an aging antelope population.

Rob asked why there is no mention of predators, to which John replied we have no way of gauging that. Art stated that rabbit populations are down, so maybe predator population are targeting the fawns. John said that definitely could be part of it.

John E. mentioned that something else interesting was that the older antelope were not in as good of shape this year as previous years. Art stated that he thought that would be more of a genetic thing. John replied that if it was a genetic thing, we would see poor quality through the years.

Bill asked what the average age span of antelope is here. John said it is difficult to answer that because aging antelope is not possible past their fourth year.

Bob asked Windy if she was doing the sage grouse study near Alzada, which she replied that they are and that project is currently in progress. Bob said he had read some literature attributing the decline in sage grouse to aerial predators. Windy stated that she would not say there is a decline in the population. She then discussed their efforts in radio collaring hens and what they have seen for mortalities. This year they collared 60 hens of which about 30 are still alive. This doesn't indicate abnormal mortality. At this point, the department is not saying that the sage grouse population is declining.

Rob asked about the RMP (resource management plan) which BLM is currently drafting. BLM is talking about changing management on a large number of acres, including Carter County, to bolster sage grouse populations. If we are so worried about sage grouse, why are we hunting them? If the sage grouse population is not declining, what are all these management practices being proposed in this RMP? Windy said that if you look at sage grouse across their entire range, yes, their populations are declining. She then explained what some of BLM's goals are with this RMP in relation to sage grouse habitat. She reminded folks that the plan is currently open to collaborator review for those who want to provide input.

John E. added that sage grouse are not endangered here. In this part of country, their populations are strong. If hunting is eliminated, cattlemen who run their stock on public lands lose that support group. Rob said it seems like the BLM is trying to get endangered species designation without having a designation. Windy replied that their status has been changed to a candidate for designation, and each year there is a process to determine this.

Julie asked if FWP is going to be a cooperating agency with the BLM on this and is there going to be a report? Windy said she is the main point person but other people will provide input as well.

Bob asked what the big picture is for sage grouse. Windy replied that they are hoping to collar more birds this year in hopes of continuing tracking them into 2012. The objective for that project, though, is

looking into how the birds use the landscape, are they migratory populations, etc. It is not *like* a directed research project.

Bob asked Windy if she would consider livestock as a detriment to sage grouse. Windy said they're not exactly looking at that but there has been both sage grouse and livestock in the same area for a long time. They are taking some related data, however.

Bill stated that he works in the natural gas industry in the Williston Basin area and he has witnessed sage grouse hanging out around oil equipment.

Rob said that the Bison pipeline was held up because of sage grouse nesting areas and consequently missed their deadline. John E. said that wasn't actually because of sage grouse, but was because of lark buntings and other birds. Windy stated that they did have timing restrictions because of sage grouse but they were not ready to start construction until later anyway. The pipeline entered into an agreement with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service over the migratory bird treaty act.

John E. continued with the hunting season update. Our biologists conduct post-season deer surveys, which are taking place now; weather has been a problem. What we are looking for is the buck to doe and fawn to doe ratios post hunting season. We are seeing 30 bucks per 100 does and 50-75 fawns per 100 does. The main deer survey is in the post-winter survey. Spring surveys are conducted end of March, beginning of April. This year these showed mule deer 12% below the LTA. As a result, mule deer doe licenses were reduced by about 3,000. Our check stations this year are showing mule deer harvest was about par. Buck harvest was up, doe harvest was down. Whitetail deer numbers are up, as was harvest. A lot of hunter comment was heard about how healthy the deer were and how many nice bucks there were. This is likely due to good moisture and vegetation.

Elk numbers are good. Hunters in the Missouri Breaks especially and Custer National Forest somewhat reported not seeing elk. This was most likely due to the late fall and prolonged green conditions which allowed the elk to not be so concentrated. There were some complaints from hunters about too many antlerless permits being issued.

*Bears/Lions/Bobcats:* Our bear harvest allows for two to be taken in the spring. We had one harvested south of Birney. Our fall quota was increased to four, which was met in mid-October. All were harvested in the southern part of the region. Lion season runs from December 1-April 15 with a quota of 25. Fifteen have been harvested to date, 5 females and 10 males. Bobcat harvest is currently at 131, which is a long way from quota of 800.

Windy asked John what check stations saw from the youth hunt. John E. gave background on this new hunt. The FWP Commission instituted a youth deer hunt the Thursday and Friday before the big game season opener. Folks really liked it and appreciated the opportunities for kids; mostly good comments were received. Another major change was that openers of antelope and deer/elk season moved to Saturdays. Fairly good response was received for that.

Art asked if the department intends to continue lowering doe numbers. John replied probably, but it will depend on what our surveys show. There's a possibility what we may have to restrict it even more. Brad commented that the winter this year is just as bad, maybe worse than previous years. We may need to look at reducing antelope again. South Dakota and North Dakota made adjustments or canceled their seasons all together this year and they had similar losses to what we had.

Rob commented that we need to slow down mule deer doe harvest.

Bob stated that there had been discussion one time about reducing doe harvest on public land. Has there been any more talk of that? John E. replied that public land is so scattered, it would be virtually impossible to enforce that. Mike M. added that the CMR does that but it is a very contiguous, easily defined chunk of land.

Rob commented about the dividing line between hunting districts for elk where one district may be antlerless and another may be something different. Why can't we do that for mule deer? John E. replied that the objective now is to reduce quotas. Next year we can address season structures. That process is on a two-year rotation.

Bill asked if there are any thoughts on having a winter muzzleloader season or winter bow season. How about an archery only tag and a separate rifle season tag? Mike M. replied that there are some of those seasons around Great Falls. Getting two either sex deer tags would require a statutory change.

Rob asked John E. about big horn sheep; isn't there a flock at Locate or Knowlton? John E. said yes, there is. Rob said that's another thing that came up in the RMP. Windy stated that BLM has a national policy about domestic sheep grazing with big horn sheep. John E. said people graze sheep up and down the Powder River. Julie added that nobody liked the CMR's plan; they're going to do it anyhow.

Warren asked about a history of drawing for sheep years ago. John E. said there used to be 1-2 ram permits issued until the early '70's. Issues with that were that there was lots of private ground, they were hard permits to get, people would get them and then couldn't use them because landowners wanted too much money for allowing hunting, so we quit the season. Some people do want the opportunity to hunt sheep but want it for themselves and some don't want it at all. ND has established two herds in national grasslands areas. A couple rams were hanging around domestic sheep north of Glendive, which raises a fear of disease being transmitted back to ram herds. The department has developed a big horn sheep plan. CMR is interested in transplanting sheep on this side of Fort Peck Lake. However, the process is not cheap and big horn sheep cannot be transplanted within nine miles of domestic sheep. There are still a lot of sheep producers in Garfield County. The potential is there but for those reasons, the transplant probably will not happen. Brad then discussed some of the social issues, nuances and details surrounding big horn sheep transplants.

Dan asked if we had gotten an indication from the check stations what the number of mature bucks taken was. John then gave percentages from the Hysham check station data for both mule deer and whitetail. Dean added that at the check stations he ran he saw a lot of bigger mule deer bucks in the 3-4 year-old age range.

John E. discussed eating habits of deer in relation to the changes in forage in the last 30 years. He referred to a study that is currently going on in the Cherry Creek area near Terry. Some varieties of vital shrubs are not reproducing as they have before. This is being noticed across the region and the whole eastern side of the state in general. Rob assimilated this to the changes in climate. Brad commented that they are also noticing decreased water levels in ponds in the same area.

Greg stated he is getting calls from landowners in the Sidney area wanting to know if the department is feeding pheasants due to the winter conditions. Brad replied no, that is not our intention. As a practice we won't do it.

Bob commented that he is seeing a lot of folks from western Montana and we will probably continue to see an increase in those folks. Hunters from western Montana are saying they have nothing left to hunt. Is that something that the department needs to get in front of? Brad replied that it has been discussed. That is something that we are noticing too and it is hard to get in front of. The extra people increase our harvest and the hunting pressure in this part of the state. It is something we need to watch closely. Bob asked if there was any way other than a drawing. Brad said he is not sure what it would be. Sportsmen will restrict themselves; this is both positive and detrimental because opportunity doesn't come back. A drawing would exclude people and you wind up losing advocacy, support, opportunity, etc. We have to maintain viability and populations and provide opportunity for the citizens of Montana. John L. added that years ago when there was low mule deer numbers on the western side of the state, a hunter had to declare where they were going to use their tag when they purchased it. Brad said he is watching for economy impacts. If fuel prices rise, are people from the other side of the state still going to come all the way over here? What has been happening is folks are limiting themselves to one trip over, but are staying longer and hunting more.

Rob stated that he thinks hunters from western Montana do not appear to be as courteous or knowledgeable about the resource as locals or nonresidents are. Brad said the complaints he gets in an average year are mostly about folks from the western side of state who come in with seemingly no respect. John E. added that a lot of those folks are used to public land hunting. Dan said he has encountered a lot of western Montana folks hunting places like the Pumpkin Creek Ranch, the Forest, etc.

### **Bridge Access Update**

Dwayne discussed the bridge access law that was passed. Last September Bob, Chris and some FWP staff members put in an access site on a bridge near Birney. Dwayne thanked Art and his dad for allowing us to put this on their private land. We intend to continue these efforts on some of the major bridges throughout Region 7 over time. Brad asked Art to watch for any issues that arise with this site and let us know if there's any signage needed, etc.

### **Parks Update**

John L. discussed some of the issues facing Parks budgets. Parks has had to do a lot of budget tightening and decreasing efforts. John discussed some potential properties that have been available for purchase, which he did not act on after foreseeing the coming budget tightening. He explained how the McCarty addition to Makoshika State Park came to be.

There was an economic impact survey done this summer with park visitors. Results indicated that nonresident visitors contribute \$122,000,000 to the state economy. This survey was done to stress to the legislature the importance of state parks to local economies. He related this fact to what's seen with Glendive with Makoshika State Park and Jordan with Hell Creek State Park. John also discussed the current opt-out vehicle registration fee. Four dollars from every vehicle registration goes to the Parks division unless folks choose to opt-out of that. This has led to significant funding for state parks. There is a legislator who is trying to change this to an opt-in fee, which is an major issue.

There is currently a primitive parks bill which limits developments of places like Medicine Rocks State Park. Parks would like to eliminate this bill because we are interested in further developing amenities for park users, such as electrical hookups and showers. Use at Region 7's state parks is continuing to increase. Visitation to our parks is up 57% in the last 12 years.

John then discussed Parks' annual fee rule. After some discussion with Helena about raising resident camping fee, it was decided to raise nonresident fees. Parks is also implementing a reservation system, particularly for electrical sites. In this region, that affects Tongue River Reservoir, Hell Creek and Makoshika State Parks.

### **Potential Legislation**

Brad gave some handouts detailing current bills in the legislature and other related information. Of a couple thousand bills typically in front of the legislature, only approximately 300 get ran through. Under Fish and Wildlife there are 152 bills now.

Website for legislative session: [http://laws.leg.mt.gov/laws11/law0203w\\$.startup](http://laws.leg.mt.gov/laws11/law0203w$.startup)

Brad explained via the above website how to view bills, check their status and get more information on them.

Brad asked Chris to comment on HB 148. Chris said this bill is specific to FWP, Department of Natural Resources, and law enforcement. It designates agents of those agencies as escorts for members of the public to retrieve big game on public lands where motorized travel is otherwise restricted.

Brad asked committee members to be aware of some of these bills and consider the effect to their operations and the department. He encouraged members to call with any questions or concerns. The group has more effect as a whole than as individuals.

### **FWP Budget: Today and Into the Future**

Brad said we have to have balanced budget; that's law. We've all seen what's happened to our economy the last couple years. In North America, the three public entities, states or provinces that are soluble still are ND, MT and Alberta, which a lot of that is due to energy development. We are heading into a legislative session now where the governor has said we can expect a budget decrease. We can probably absorb 5% but it still will mean a reduction in services. Much more beyond that, then we have to cut people. Brad said what we have seen is we seem to run on a five-year cycle where we ask for a fee increase, which bumps our revenue up over time, we end up spending that money as we go, and finally hit a point where our expenditures are not matched by our revenue. As it stands now, if we don't have a fee increase by 2012, we won't balance. We had partial fee increases in 2003 and 2005. 2003 was a nonresident increase and 2005 was a resident increase, but they weren't what we usually get. Brad added that what this means to the CAC is just that he wants them to be aware of it and that's where we're heading. One of the things that have arisen is the possible elimination of the CAC's. At this time, no decision has been made, but as a region we have decided to reduce our expenses and go to meeting twice a year.

Rob asked where all the money is coming from to acquire new land. He doesn't think eliminating the CAC, which is a volunteer committee, will save much. Brad said the value of the committee to have this interchange is worth what we spend, but it may or may not wind up being his decision. In regards to land acquisitions, one of the things we do struggle with is where that money comes from. There are earmarked funds that have to be spent. John E. added that we have a program called Habitat Montana,

which is sportsman-generated dollars, that generates about \$4.5 million/year. This money can go for easements, land purchase or leases. Virtually most of the money we spend out here is for developing Conservation Easements.

Julie said as a former county commissioner, she hates to see more public ground as that takes away from counties.

### **Public Comment**

Chuck Laakso and Mark Jacobsen would like to put a plug in for a muzzleloader season. This would be a great way to draw in some other people.

Rob asked what the problem would be with having a muzzleloader season in conjunction with the archery season. Chuck said he thinks they are about the same, especially distance-wise. Greg asked Chuck if he is proposing a separate tag for muzzleloaders. He added that you can't sell more licenses than you can fill. Chuck replied that harvest would be low in muzzleloader season.

Mark would like to propose that in areas where there is safety concerns, populated areas, etc. that the department consider a limited muzzleloader season and charge extra for a tag to generate revenue to manage that type of system. Examples are Block Management Areas, Pirogue Island and the Fort Keogh archery zone. Brad said those are some ideas to discuss internally.

George added that this would be a good tool to look at for the Colstrip deer management hunt as well. Brad also added that Glendive is facing the same urban deer challenges as Colstrip and is currently looking into a management plan. Muzzle loading is another tool that should be considered for them.

John E. stated that the only people allowed to discharge firearms in city limits is law enforcement personnel, but in outlying areas muzzleloaders is something that could be employed.

### **Roundtable Discussion**

Bob asked if I-161 will affect department funding. Dwayne replied it depends on if the licenses sell.

Brad added that it should increase a little bit of funding if all the licenses sell. Bob asked if the department had an official or unofficial stance on I-161. Brad said we stayed neutral. Mike M. added we provided information on the fiscal note, but that was it. Bob asked if those licenses will sell looking past history. Brad said yes. Art said he had people tell him that they were not going to apply. Brad said we hear that a lot but looking at numbers, there is three people for every one license and they are in demand. The economy may dictate interest more than anything. John E. added that looking at the fiscal note, there would be roughly \$750,000 more in Block Management this year if those licenses sell.

Bill brought up a Block Management issues; on one particular place near Baker that he was interested in hunting all of the sign-in slips were used up before the season opened. The landowner lives in California; who do you get a hold of if you want to hunt there? What can we do to prevent this from happening? Brad said in Region 6, technicians post a number to call if the sign-in boxes are empty. We could do something like that as well. John E. added if someone runs into that situation, they need to call the office or one of the numbers listed in our tabloid.

Dan said in consideration of a muzzleloader season, urbanized areas need to be focused on. We should look at areas that we can work with internally here and expand throughout the region.

**Next meeting: July 20<sup>th</sup>** with tour. Members are asked to think of ideas of where they would like to tour.